

間宮夏生

イラスト・白味噌



美人な美術教師と個人レッスン
魅惑の響きに甘い誘惑、そして――疑惑!?

シニカル男子と可愛い悪女の
心揺れるラブストーリー!!

月光

負けず嫌いなクレセントムーン

The Crescent Moon Who Hates to Lose

Part 1

Zealous yells rose up from the school grounds as the baseball fanatics held a practice match, and joyful laughter resounded all the way from the pool as a group of girls enjoyed themselves splashing water at each other. The background noise was accompanied by the never-ceasing chirping of cicadas from the copse in the backyard.

It was summer outside the classroom. It was summer indeed. Summer had the world in its grip.

The springtime of our life? Why, no, we could clearly rename it to the summertime of our life.

As a natural consequence, summer also had my classroom in its iron grip, warming up the air to a stifling sauna. We were nothing but helpless servants in the face of the overwhelming power of our lord and master.

I raised my head at a funereal pace and fixed my vacant gaze on the blazing fire ball reigning over the sky. I slowly opened my mouth to speak.

“...Could you turn it down a bit?”

Frankly, I couldn't stand summer. And if there was anything that I loathed, it was the midsummer sun. If I were a hero and the sun a demon king, then I would be gathering my comrades and launching my crusade as we speak.

“You're incredibly cute when behaving like a child, Nonomiya-kun!” the girl beside me giggled while pretending to be paying attention to the notifications from the committee. I quickly turned around to scowl at her, only to find myself forgetting my counter out of sheer astonishment.

Every single one of the roughly thirty students, who had gathered from all grades for the regular student council meeting, was drenched in sweat, had their uniform stick to their skin, and was desperately trying to keep their

consciousness from vaporizing. But her? Her uniform and hair were in perfect order, and naturally there wasn't even a drop of perspiration on her face. She looked as cool and refreshed as if she lived in another world.

"It seems that even the midsummer sun is powerless against Youko Tsukimori and her heart of ice."

"You're absolutely right. Everyone knows that only a prince's 'tender kiss' can melt a frozen heart," she replied, deflecting my sarcastic remark with the greatest of ease, and flashed a smile as she sneaked her hand on my thigh, hidden under the desk. "My prince!"

I was getting a headache, and that was certainly not only because of the heat. Dizzy for various reasons, I could only manage a "...Give me a break" as I brushed Tsukimori's hand away.

Either she enjoyed the look of disgust on people's faces or had the abnormal trait of drawing immense enjoyment from being treated coldly; Youko Tsukimori wasn't disheartened by my rejection. Quite the contrary, she happily narrowed her eyes and said, "Meanie!"

Ever since that midnight rendezvous at the park, she had become more and more obtrusive as the temperature rose. If there was a difference between the temperature and her behavior, then it was the fact that it was highly unlikely for her to cool off come winter.

Without saying another word, I let out a deep sigh that conveyed my annoyance.

Before long, the meeting ended. Youko Tsukimori stood up and her fellow class representatives started to gather around her without delay. That was her fate as the most popular person at this school.

Since I was reasonable enough not to concern myself with others' fates, I left her behind without hesitation and walked out of the room.

"I am sorry, but I have to go to work," she suddenly apologized to her

admirers in a polite yet slightly rushed manner and trotted over to me. She then gave me a smile and said, “Let’s go, Nonomiya-kun.”

After positioning herself by my side as if it was the most natural thing to do, she wrapped her little finger around mine so that the bystanders would not notice a thing.

Seeing how thoroughly she enjoyed our secret relationship, the thought of how much her behavior would escalate by winter sent a cold shiver down my spine.

We continued arguing back and forth as we walked through the empty corridor toward our classroom.

“...Correct me if I’m wrong, but are you under a spell that keeps you from walking straight if you don’t lean against someone?” I sighed.

“Feeling shy? There’s no need to be – no one is watching!”

“Shy? Do I look shy to you?”

“Flushed cheeks, heavy breathing ... have I got you aroused?”

“I’m just hot! Get off me already! If my head looks red right now, then it’s because of anger!” I retorted and pushed her away. However, she immediately jumped back and paid me back by clinging to me even tighter.

And thus, a meaningless cycle of pushing and clinging was set off and continued repeating itself while growing fiercer and fiercer as we walked through the corridor.

Oh boy, what am I doing ... as if it wasn’t hot enough already, I thought to myself, noticing that I was drenched in sweat because of our little fight. The fact that there was not a drop of sweat on her face was fueling my irritation and kept me from stopping.

In the end, it was Tsukimori who put an end to our futile fight.

All of a sudden, she stopped. She took a few steps from me and put on her

usual smile. There was no trace of the childish behavior anymore. Instead, there was Youko Tsukimori, the girl everyone admired.

I quickly straightened up as well and cautiously followed her glance with my eyes. At the end of the corridor, which was bathing in the light of the setting sun, I could make out the slender silhouette of a person.

As we proceeded through the corridor, the silhouette slowly drew nearer to us. The sharp footfalls hitting the linoleum floor easily gave away the identity of the approaching person.

As I had expected, it was none other than the fine arts instructor Misaki Takaoka.

Every student at Senkou High could immediately recognize her by her footfalls. Misaki. There was only one teacher who wore stilettos at this school, and that was Misaki Takaoka.

She didn't look like a teacher at all. If anything, her outward appearance made her look like the college girl next door. Apart from her stilettos, she also wore a short skin-tight skirt and an oversized shirt with rolled-up sleeves, and in her ears she had a pair of large earrings. However she didn't wear much in the way of makeup and didn't seem to use any special hair treatment either. To top it all off, it seemed like she was too lazy to wear bras.

The reason why I described her as the "college girl next door" was because she wasn't just pretty, but also let you take a glimpse at her lifestyle with her getup.

Needless to say, Misaki Takaoka was *very* popular among Kamogawa and the male bunch that were true to their instincts. The decadent atmosphere surrounding her was unique and somehow distorted and, spiced up with the contrast to her job as a teacher, charmed whoever looked at her.

You usually make yourself enemies among the same sex when you dress up so sexy, but curiously, her bold atmosphere stroke a chord with the girls at

school.

That said, as a teacher she was clearly a misfit and stepped out of line. Our strict vice-principal would frequently criticize her for being a bad example for us students.

As we passed by Misaki Takaoka, Tsukimori greeted her with nod. Suddenly, the stilettos stopped hitting the floor.

“Hey there, I’ve been meaning to ask this for some time now, but...”

Misaki Takaoka was our class’s instructor in fine arts, so we knew each other. However, she had never gotten in touch with us outside classes.

“...Are you dating each other?”

She closely glanced at the two of us while narrowing her somewhat drooping eyes, brimming with unconcealed curiosity.

She really doesn’t wear a bra... I suddenly realized as her charming cleavage, exposed by the two open buttons of her shirt, caught my eye.

“Do we look like a couple?” Youko Tsukimori responded with a friendly smile. Unlike me, she didn’t bat an eye and was perfectly calm.

“Yeah,” Misaki Takaoka nodded without missing a beat.

She was so assertive, in fact, that it dawned on me with horror that she might have witnessed our “fight” a few moments ago. Without knowing the circumstances, it *might* have looked a bit like two lovers flirting.

On the other hand, there was no way that Youko Tsukimori would accidentally let someone get on to her “secret.” Because of that I was horribly confused as to why Misaki Takaoka had come to that conclusion.

“My! In that case I should feel honored,” Tsukimori said.

“Oh, I didn’t know that you had such a high opinion of Nonomiya-kun.”

“Huhu, Nonomiya-kun is actually quite popular, but I suppose you didn’t

know that,” Tsukimori countered with giggle.

“Really? Well, he’s fairly good looking and doesn’t seem too clingy. I like that.”

“*My*”, “*oh*”, “*huhu*”, “*really*”... Even though their exchange of words was as peaceful as it gets at first glance, my throat was as dry as sandpaper. I couldn’t shake off the notion that I was watching a fierce cat-and-mouse game.

While I had become used to Tsukimori’s unfathomable personality, I also sensed a similar kind of obscurity in this fine arts instructor.

Simply put, what was this schemer up to?

“Ah, right, Tsukimori-san! I heard your parents passed away...?”

Something in her words caught my attention, but I couldn’t quite point out what it was. Tsukimori paused for a moment, apparently feeling the same, and replied slightly delayed, “...Yes.”

“Oh dear...! You must have gone through tough times, then, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I suppose so ... It was not easy.”

Misaki Takaoka may look like a minx, but she was still a teacher; there was nothing wrong with her offering her condolences to a student. The problem was her *timing*.

While slowly brushing up her hair, she started to smile.

“But you look totally fine now.”

Tsukimori’s parents had passed away at the end of May and it was the end of July now, shortly before our summer holidays. Two months had passed since. Because of other interesting topics like the Big Senkou Conference, her incidence had since disappeared into oblivion.

“Goes to show why you’re respected by students and teachers alike.

Impressing ... A normal girl your age wouldn't be so calm after losing her parents." With these words, she looked over to me for some reason. "Don't you agree, Nonomiya-kun?"

I ground my back teeth for an instant and replied with a boring answer in a boring tone, "I'm afraid I can't judge over that."

"You are overestimating me; only thanks to the help of many, many people could I move on so fast," Tsukimori explained and suddenly turned at me. "Of course, you are one of them as well."

She just totally used me as a shield, I thought to myself while narrowing my eyes and replied with an equally boring answer as before, "Well, you heard her."

"Mhm...? Alrighty," Misaki Takaoka muttered as she curved her sensual lips to a knowing smile and narrowed her eyes. Her sudden cold shift in attitude alarmed me.

Has this woman picked up on something regarding the passing of Tsukimori's parents...?

No, impossible, I answered myself immediately.

I am the only one in the world who doubts Youko Tsukimori.

However, I found myself unable to disregard Misaki Takaoka's meaningful attitude. The way she expressed herself in a provocative manner hinted at some kind of certainty.

I didn't know her well enough, and I deemed that continuing an unpredictable conversation with an unfamiliar person was a bad idea. It was without doubt advisable to suspend this talk for the time being.

Just when I started getting antsy to end this conversation:

"Now, if you'll excuse us, Misaki-sensei. We have to go to work," Tsukimori said and then turned at me with a smile as gentle as the first rays of the

morning sun. “We should hurry, Nonomiya-kun.”

Color me impressed. That was Youko Tsukimori to a tee; she may be dreadful as a foe, but she was most reliable as an ally.

“Oh, I’m sorry for taking your time then. But don’t take Nonomiya-kun with you, okay? There’s something I need to talk about with him.” However, Misaki Takaoka didn’t give up so easily. “Oh, don’t give me that sour look, Nonomiya-kun. You’re breaking my heart! It’s your fault, you know? Remember the portrait sketch you handed in the other day?”

“...Yes.”

“That sketch is terrible! Atrocious even! I have seen a lot of sketches in the course of my career, but I can say with confidence that yours are easily the worst!”

Her expression was so earnest that I had to avert my eyes. I was perfectly aware of my poor skill at art, but it was kind of awkward to have somebody lay it on the line for me.

“...Everybody has their own strengths and weaknesses,” I muttered in an attempt to explain myself.

“No,” she countered. “You clearly lack motivation or you wouldn’t be *that* bad. Because of that, my dear Nonomiya-kun, I will now take you to the art room and give you a sermon.”

With a soft smile on her face, she confined me by entwining her arms with mine.

“Tsukimori-san, may I ask you to tell your boss that Nonomiya-kun was called out by his teacher and can’t come to work?” Misaki Takaoka said as she pulled me toward herself. The soft, unobstructed touch that I felt wrapping around my arm left me speechless.

“Yes ... I suppose there is nothing to be done about it then. I shall pass on the

message,” Tsukimori said with a faint smile on her lips and swiftly turned around, swaying her beautiful black hair in the air.

I caught a glimpse at her out of the corner of my eye. If I wasn’t mistaken, the look she gave me while making her exit was anything but a smile.

Part 2

“Want some sugar?” the woman asked as she poured a black liquid from a carton into a mug.

I, on the other hand, was occupied with gazing at the countless sculptures and oil paintings that had been stowed away in the art preparation room and only gave her a brief, “I’ll have mine black.”

“Oh, that’s quite unusual for someone your age.”

“I’m used to drinking coffee because I work at a café.”

Misaki Takaoka carried the two mugs over to the work table and sat down on the opposite side. “Have one,” she said as she pushed one cup toward me, which I accepted with a thanks. It was time for a short iced coffee break.

The preparation room we were at was situated right beside the art room. It was about half the size of a common classroom and had only two doors: one to the corridor and one to the art room.

The room was cluttered and filled with a complicated combination of smells that consisted of paint, plaster and various metals. As an amateur, I couldn’t fathom what was the beauty of all the paintings and sculptures stored here, let alone tell which were finished and which were not. Even the tools I found ranged from familiar to cryptic. Apart from paintbrushes, putties and files, there were also instruments probably used for sculpting such as hammers, chisels and picks.

Since Misaki Takaoka was the only fine arts instructor at this school, this room was effectively her atelier.

“Now tell me, you’re dating each other, aren’t you?” she asked, bringing the matter up again. “Why don’t you tell Misaki? Hm? It’ll be our little promise!”

“Ahem, weren’t you going to give me a sermon...?”

“Huh? You want one? So you swing *that* way, Nonomiya-kun? Mmhm ... Well, we’re alone here, so I guess I wouldn’t mind stepping on you with my heels if that’s what you want for telling me the truth.”

She glanced at me – and my frown – while moving her voluminous breasts up and down as she breathed in and out. The sermon had apparently been an excuse to drag me here.

“Let me put this straight: we are not in the kind of relationship that you might be anticipating.”

There was no word that could accurately describe our relationship, but in the very least it was not something as simple as *that*.

“If you get the feeling that we’re intimate, then that’s because we work at the same café and are the two representatives of our class. I unavoidably have to associate somewhat more with her than the other guys,” I said, reciting the same inoffensive explanation that I had already given a thousand times to various people. In fact, most of them were actually satisfied with this explanation, probably with the help of wishful thinking on their part.

Everyone wished for Youko Tsukimori to be special and stay that way.

“Hmm ... That’s not it, you know. The reason why I thought you were a couple isn’t so superficial.”

Her response was unexpected. I froze on the spot with the mug pressed against my lips and started to observe her.

“Do you want to know what I’m talking about?”

All of a sudden, Misaki Takaoka stood up, walked straight to my side and

brought her face right to my ear.

“Curious, aren’t you?” With a scheming look she let out a breath as if to spread some kind of powder over me.

“...No, not really...” I replied while turning away from her. I hate to admit it, but I was overwhelmed by the bewitching pressure she put on me. I lacked experience.

“Liar. I can read it off your face: you’re *itching* to know, aren’t you?” she muttered and poked my cheek with her finger while giggling in silent rapture. I could clearly sense my flesh crawling all over my body.

I was in disarray – in utter confusion.

I had been perfectly aware of her attractiveness as an adult woman and of the fact that this room was her home ground. However, after what I had been through with Youko Tsukimori, I had been sure that I would not lose to her even if she was an unpredictable adult woman.

And yet, here I was dancing in the palm of her hand.

“Be honest with your teacher. You want to know, don’t you?”

“...Well, I guess I do. Given the choice.”

“Well said, my dear. I’m sorry, but I whenever I see a rebellious boy or girl, I just can’t resist the urge to tease them.”

I was terrified as I watched her gentle smile before me, overwhelmed by irresistible anxiety. It was a horrible feeling that resembled having one’s guts eaten away alive.

“Wait here for a sec, okay?” Misaki Takaoka said with a wink as she stood up and walked away.

It was then that I finally noticed that I was drenched as though I had plunged straight into a pool in full attire. On top of that, I also *felt* as though I had just swum a few lengths: my body was exhausted and my heart pumping.

And yet – I couldn't believe it – I was smiling.

My bad habit was kicking in. Even though my head was sounding the alarm and telling me to stay away from this woman, my heart was throbbing with anticipation for what kind of trap she had set for me.

I was as excited as the day I'd learned about Youko Tsukimori. My body was rejoicing over the discovery of a tough opponent.

“Here, these are the sketches I was talking about.”

As soon as she returned, she sat down again and arranged several sketches on the table. Among them were also some that I didn't recognize as mine.

“Scribbles without *a trace* of motivation whatsoever,” she surmised.

“The subject is ‘apathy.’”

“As the lecturer of your fine-arts classes, I can't let that slide. Come on, at least try to be motivated!”

“It would be painful to look at if I tried to be motivated. I'm simply beyond rescue as far as my skill at drawing goes. Besides, you can't ask of me to be motivated when drawing Kamogawa. Seriously.”

“Well, I see you're quite stubborn, but I guess that's your personality!” she laughed. “—A drawing is the mirror of an artist's heart,” she suddenly added whispering. “That's a quote from my own teacher in fine arts, but I couldn't agree more. An artist's mental state and their personality is strongly reflected in their drawings – and because it all happens unconsciously, they tend to give away more than any words could ever do. It's a lot of fun because you can basically peek into other people's hearts.”

Misaki Takaoka narrowed her eyes with amusement. I wouldn't be surprised if she licked her lips any moment.

“Now if that isn't a lovely hobby ... so that's why you always have us draw a sketch at the beginning of every class. You're combining your job and your

hobby.”

“You got me there, Nonomiya-kun. But don’t tell anyone, okay? I don’t want my students to think I’m an oddball.”

“Don’t worry: You’re already famous as one. Irrevocably.”

“Oh my, where did it all go wrong?”

“Don’t ask me.”

“Because of my looks?” she started asking herself, completely disregarding my snappy remark. “But most people working in this field tend to not fit into the norm, do they?” she muttered, mulling over something and tilting her head left and right.

“And? Could you go on with your point?”

I’m not going to mince matters any longer. There’s no point in following the etiquette.

“In a nutshell, I can easily analyze people by looking at their drawings.”

In other words, she knew perfectly what kind of person I was.

“Your sketches for example are, well, *incredible* in terms of atrociousness, but that’s not my point. From composition to the details, your drawings are defined by a stunningly objective sense of observation. The way you use your pencil is mostly careful yet rough at times. From these pointers I can deduct that you’re good at analyzing and careful. Well, basically you’re a prime example of a passive person. However—”

I was absorbed in her explanation. I hadn’t put down my guard by any means, however; I was simply starting to get fascinated by this woman in a way that surpassed my defense.

“—At the very core you have a somewhat twisted personality ... submitting yourself to the rules of a system bores you and arouses some sort of desire for destruction in you. It makes you turn aggressive, even cruel, from time to

time,” she explained and gave me a self-confident smile. “What do you say? Bull’s eye?”

While I didn’t put it into words, I fully concurred with her analysis. She was correct. I was genuinely amazed at how she had been able to see through me just by looking at some sketches.

The word “profiling” crossed my mind, which is a behavioral tool for criminal analysis used by the police in crime investigations.

“Let’s get to the interesting part, though,” she then said. “I bet you’re burning to hear what I have to say, right?” she claimed with a triumphant look as she placed two sketches before me that someone else had drawn.

I was indeed very curious...

“These two are by Tsukimori-san.”

...about how Misaki Takaoka was going to profile Youko Tsukimori.

“As an art teacher, I must say they’re flawless. Nearly perfect. She was 100% faithful to the textbooks.”

One of the sketches had Mizuru Usami as the model. Compared to her drawing, my unsightly sketch of Ugawa was like day and night. I couldn’t hold a candle to her even when taking into consideration that Ugawa himself was unsightly already.

However, Misaki Takaoka looked displeased.

“But as an artist, if I may call myself one, I must say that I don’t often see a drawing that is so beautiful yet so awfully boring.”

Even though I was a complete layman in art, I could see that Tsukimori’s sketch may have been perfect in the sense of being as almost as precise as a picture, but the pedantic exactness made it boring.

“She’s actually just like you, Nonomiya-kun. Not the slightest sign of interest to be found in her drawings,” she sighed and gave me a wry smile. “You can

easily recognize that she's an excellent student from the perfect composition and the drawing technique of her sketches. I bet she's aware of the 'safest' way to draw each stroke. She's only ever following these trails, which is why her works turn out serene, or bureaucratic and emotionless as I would put it. Bluntly said, her drawings have a severe lack of emotion that makes them seem cold-blooded even."

I heard myself gulp down.

"Keep in mind that she was sketching *real people*. I mean, normally, when you draw a person, your impression of that person flows into your drawing to some extent. Heh, for example, your sketch of Kamogawa-kun is literally dripping with discontent!" the woman laughed, bouncing her décolletage.

"...But there's no inkling of any emotion in her drawings as you may see." she continued. "Nothing shows in the emotional mirror that is art, and that's unsettling. I've also seen some of Tsukimori-san's still-life paintings, and you know what? It doesn't seem to matter to her whether she's drawing a person or an apple."

This was something only Misaki Takaoka, an art teacher, could have discovered.

"Tsukimori-san may be sociable and courteous, but I'm pretty sure that's not her true face..."

With a razor-sharp look pinned on Tsukimori's drawings, she looked like a coroner. As I gazed at her from the side, I recalled a certain, frivolous police detective. He, too, had described Tsukimori as "too perfect and therefore suspicious." Most likely, Misaki Takaoka's hunch and the intuition of that cunning detective were of similar nature.

"Anyway, there is one drawing where she added an emotional touch."

With these words, she produced a sketch and held it out to me. As I realized who that familiar person was, I was slightly taken aback.

“—Only when she sketched you, Nonomiya-kun! At a glance, it may not look any different from her previous sketch, but if you take a closer look, you’ll notice some parts that she corrected over and over. That’s when it clicked with me and I realized that you, Nonomiya-kun, are special to her.”

Right next to me was an obnoxious woman with a naughty smirk all over her face.

“What do you say? I’ve hit the mark, haven’t I?”

I wordlessly emptied my cup of ice coffee with a single gulp and turned to her.

“Takaoka-sensei,” I started and got straight to the point. “Earlier, when we met in the corridor, you touched on the death of Youko Tsukimori’s parents from two months ago, right?”

While looking me straight in the eye, she sighed, “...Asking questions but not answering any, eh?”

“Quite frankly, that was inappropriate of you. Reminding a student of though memories is clearly lacking consideration.”

“Oh, how merciless. Would you forgive me if I said that the words slipped out of my mouth because I was so worried about Tsukimori-san?”

Despite my biting remark, the woman teacher showed practically no sign of flinching ... which proved my hypothesis.

“Of course not. You had some kind of proof or a clear reason to bring up the incident of her parents.”

Suddenly, she was all smiles and started to clap before her décolleté. “You’re just the shrewd observer I thought you’d be! My assessment was spot on!”

“I’d rather you answered my question instead of praising me.”

“You’re an interesting boy, Nonomiya-kun. I think I can understand why Tsukimori-san would be attracted to you.”

I frowned at her.

“Help! Don’t make such a scary face!” she jested while ducking her head. “Well ... I don’t think I should explain myself without some kind of compensation, so let me add a little condition. If you answer my request, I will also answer your question.”

I tensed up, wary of what she was up to, but since there was no other way, I decided to accept her offer and asked, “What do you want?”

“Starting tomorrow, I want you to come here and be my model for a few days,” she said with a bewitching smile.

Her triumphant look sent a cold shiver down my spine, but I still nodded. “... Understood.”

My bad habit had gotten the better of me. While I was not happy with this outcome, I was not only itching to learn about her relation to Tsukimori, but I was also highly intrigued by her suspicious personality. Being able to spend more time with her was in line with my desire to know more about Misaki Takaoka.

Part 3

One day later in the morning, I entered the classroom and sat down in my seat, immediately after which Youko Tsukimori turned to me from the neighboring seat and asked, “How was your sermon?”

“I was reminded of how terrible I am at drawing and resolved to lay down my pen once and for all.”

“What else?”

“...There was nothing else. Takaoka-sensei simply advised me to show some motivation regardless of my actual skill and my indifferent stance toward art.”

She closely gazed at me with her well-shaped eyes that were framed by long

eyelashes, but once she heard my explanation, she abruptly ended our conversation with a blunt and disinterested, “If you say so.”

Later that day, after school, Tsukimori brushed up her black hair while saying, “Let’s go, Nonomiya-kun,” as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“No,” I countered in a blunt tone of voice. “Can you tell Mr. Kujirai that I’m taking today off again?”

Tsukimori’s eyes narrowed like a decrescent moon. “...I know it’s a silly question, but certainly you do not have an appointment with Takaoka-sensei, right?”

Her reaction was quite understandable, since I had only just met that woman teacher the day before.

“What if I do? It’s none of your business.”

My reply wound up being harsher than intended, although I didn’t know if that was because of my conscience or her poignant look.

“I apologize if you have taken offense. I did not mean to meddle in your social affairs,” she said and then gave me a faint smile. “But I would like you to remember *who* is going to explain the reason for your absence to ‘Mirai-san’—”

I covered my face in shock.

“Nonomiya, you bloody slacker! Thinking you’re cut above us, eh?”

A loud roar reverberated in my mind. I had almost forgotten ... there was no way in hell Mirai-san would let me get away with not showing up for work two days in a row without a convincing reason. She’s a lot more bossy than Mr. Kujirai even though she’s not even a salaried staff. If I were Saruwatari-san, I’d get beaten up the next day for sure.

“But let’s see ... I do not endorse this kind of thing, but since it’s you,

Nonomiya-kun, I could brush it over if you wish me to. I do think that I deserve to know the truth, though. Don't you agree?"

Her request was justified – I was supposed to treat her with all possible sincerity in exchange for giving her the dangerous task of negotiating with the “beast.”

“...I have to take extra lessons in fine arts because my grades are extremely bad.”

All sincerity aside, the actual reason revolved around Tsukomori herself, so I couldn't possibly tell her the truth. Knowing how sharp-witted she was, she was bound to see through my improvised explanation, but I had no choice but to adhere to my excuse.

“Uh-huh? Is this how you return a favor, Nonomiya-kun? Fine. I have my ways, too,” she said as she threw her feminine hips to the side while scowling at me.

It was rare for her to show her discontent so overtly when she would usually always play the understanding girl regardless of how she really felt. While I couldn't tell whether she was pulling an act or genuinely unhappy, it was certainly the first time I had seen her like this.

“There is absolutely no need to worry, Nonomiya-kun – I'll tell Mirai-san that you are busy making out with your pretty and super-sexy fine arts instructor.”

“H-Hold on! There are things that you just don't joke about, and you know that!”

“Oh my, today is going to be a busy day. Because of a certain unanticipated absence, I will have to wait all tables on my own again.”

Tsukomori left the classroom with a parting shot that was dripping with sarcasm.

The mere thought of my next time at work was giving me a headache.

I could not disagree with a certain girl's assessment of Misaki Takaoka as a pretty and super-sexy instructor. That said, the kind of thing that this certain girl had pictured to herself did not occur even once.

“Takaoka-sensei...”

“...Stay still, Nonomiya-kun, we're almost done. Be a good boy and hang in there for a moment.”

Since I was posing as a model, I was not even allowed to speak, let alone move. Apparently, Misaki Takaoka diverged from her norm when it came to art and turned dead-serious.

Oh boy, I didn't know that posing was so tiresome.

While she was drawing me for about an hour each time, I dearly regretted accepting her request without thinking it through.

By the time she called it a day, my limbs would be numb and my neck stiff. I would move like an unoiled robot when I stood up from the pedestal. “Haha! Just look at you!” she would then laugh at me. I felt humiliated.

On the other hand, I had no other choice but to swallow it, since finishing the sketch of me was the condition she had imposed upon me.

However, the time we spent chit-chatting before heading home proved to be immensely worthwhile and was the saving grace for me.

“Notice how Usami-chan refuses to change the way she draws even if it means to disregard the overall balance of the drawing. She's actually pretty stubborn – the type of person that has a very narrow view once she gets absorbed. But putting it another way, she is very pure and loyal. It's totally understandable that a straightforward girl like her would be loved by everyone.”

The way that Misako Takaoka observed people through their drawings was

unique and extremely interesting. I had been a fool to avoid her because she seemed troublesome, when she was really such an interesting person.

However, that was a matter for itself and had nothing to do with my real objective. I was here to find out what this instructor knew about Youko Tsukimori.

What was she going to tell me about Tsukimori's parents...?

While I still could not grasp Misako Takaoka's personality, I was quite sure that she would not say something that was off the mark, considering her exceptional skill at human analysis. It was unclear whether she was on our side or not to begin with.

It all depended on her reply. Depending on what she knew, it was entirely possible for her to become my enemy.

However, that was only my ego speaking. I was not trying to be a hero who watches over Tsukimori from the shadows. What drove me was the simple desire to monopolize her secret.

—A few days passed like this without any noticeable trouble, until on the last day, an incident occurred. As a consequence, rumors started to spread out in school that made Misaki Takaoka and me out to be a couple.

That day I had been forced to be a statue for a longer time than usual. In fact, my limbs were so numb that I was starting to fear that I might actually turn into one. It was all because Misaki Takaoka had said that she might be able to finish her drawing at last.

“...Here we go! I'm done!”

Just when I was going to raise a complaint or two, I was finally released.

“Splendid, if I may say so myself. Come here, Nonomiya-kun, take a look!”

Who would have expected that? She was beckoning me over when she would usually refuse to show me the progress of her oil painting!

Needless to say, I was curious about how she had drawn me. I jumped to my feet ... and a few moments later, the back of a chair bumped against the linoleum floor and a stiletto was flung through the air.

I had screwed up. Because of the long holding-still, my body felt stiff like that of a wooden doll and my legs had become disobedient as though they had taken roots – I immediately lost balance when I stood up and stumbled over. Of course, if that had been all, the case would have been closed right here, provided I was willing to accept an embarrassing mishap. However, the direction and the timing in which I stumbled were downright terrible.

The scene looked as though a student had let the reins of his sexual drive slacken and thrown himself at his sexy art teacher.

“...Aww, Nonomiya-kun, I didn’t expect you to be the aggressive type of guy,” the woman said with rapt eyes from below.

The soft touch on the palm of my hand, which seemed to engulf it, was probably due to her not wearing a bra.

“You want me to compensate you with my body? All right, I don’t mind giving the lead away once in a while, so strictly speaking, that’s fine with me!”

Yes – I was lying on top of Misaki Takaoka’s luscious body that was as soft as a feather pillow.



The buttons of her shirt must have come undone during the fall – her soft breasts were making themselves mightily noticeable by almost bursting free. Her bare thighs had become visible from under her turned-up skirt – which was short enough as it was – and depending on the position of my face, I could be sure to catch a glimpse of the cloth hiding further inside.

“...I-I’m sorry.”

I tried lifting my upper body, but still numbed, it would not obey its master. And then, as if to ridicule me, “Excuse me, is Takaoka-sensei ther—” a girl student walked in on us at the worst thinkable time.

It goes without saying that the rumors of our “forbidden affair” had spread like wildfire by the day that followed.

Kamokawa’s guys-alliance welcomed me with disgusting smiles, asking me to “come over for a moment”, just to start pestering me with all sorts of questions. Usami, on the other hand, ranted and raved at me, saying that I were “a tits maniac after all” and calling me “lewd” and “pervy” for it. And if that hadn’t been enough, the vice-principal summoned me via the PA system and gave Misaki Takaoka and me a lengthy sermon.

As for Youko Tsukmori, she walked up to me and whispered in my ear, “An accident, hm? Do you think I would buy that story? I mean ... you also pushed me over once, didn’t you?” I didn’t know how to respond to *that*.

A few days after that unfortunate accident at the art preparation room:

“You had quite some bad luck there,” Misaki Takaoka laughed, to which I replied, “...Please don’t act like you were not part of it.”

I was clearly not as assertive as usual – I was fed up with the fuss. Why did I have to get into such trouble?

While it was true that I had been a bit careless, it was just an accident for the most part. I was out of luck indeed.

Part 4

It had been a week since I'd last shown up at Victoria.

Mr. Kujirai and Saruwatari-san welcomed me with a warm "long time no see," whereas Mirai-san gave me a rough "Nonomiya, you bloody slacker! Thinking you're cut above us, eh?" Just as expected.

I had mentally prepared myself for all kinds of snappy remarks from Mirai-san. In fact, her bluntness and straightforward attitude was so much easier to deal with in comparison to how a certain someone treated me.

Yes, what really caused me quite a headache was Youko Tsukimori's attitude. She was giving me the silent treatment.

Neither did she greet me nor did she say a single sarcastic remark – she just silently did her job as a waitress and treated me like air.

I wondered if Tsukimori was still mad at me for pushing Misaki Takaoka over even though I had laid it out to her that it was an accident.

I concluded that it would be a bad idea to make a fuss about whether it was true or not, and therefore decided to let her be until she was back to normal.

However, when she said goodbye to the other staff and left the staff room without exchanging a single word with me all day, I couldn't keep quiet any longer.

"You're being unreasonable. Your attitude isn't going to achieve anything," I said when I discovered her slender silhouette in a gloomy side alley that led to the station.

Just looking at her back made her displeasure obvious. Giving free rein to her emotions was really unlike her; her attitude struck me as really childish for someone who usually kept a cool head and appeared to be perfect in every way.

"I'm not in the mood for playing cat-and-mouse with you. It's a waste of

time,” I added.

I couldn’t help but feel that there was some kind of “catch” behind her unusual behavior.

“If you want to say something, then get it off your chest!” I tried demanding an explanation for her puzzling attitude while walking along after catching up with her, but all I got to hear were her steady footsteps echoing through the alley.

Slightly irritated, I grabbed her hand. However, she shook my hand off without saying a word or even looking at me, and just kept walking toward the station.

As I gazed at my empty palm, I clicked my tongue. *What am I doing? I look like some pathetic guy who’s clinging to his ex-girlfriend. Without success.*

“What have I done to deserve this...?” Fed up with looking like a fool, I stopped following her. But I couldn’t do without a last remark to quieten my irritation. “If you want to blame me, then please do so to your heart’s content! However, listen carefully: I swear on my pride that I’m innocent!”

My voice reverberated through the side alley. Yelling at somebody without the hope for a response was an absolutely miserable experience.

Right after I had turned around, I heard quick footsteps approaching me from behind. Before I even had a chance to turn around, she pulled me toward her by my necktie.

Right before my eyes was an unfamiliar girl. The girl gazed up at me and said:

“Why...? Why do you not understand?”

Of course, it was Youko Tsukimori, but the expression on her face was so unlike her that I couldn’t shake off the impression that I was facing someone else. She looked almost like a second Chinatsu Usami.

“You really don’t understand how a girl’s heart works,” the girl said as she cast a pouty upward glance at me, blew out her slightly flushed cheeks, and pursed her lips. It was the kind of childish, sulky face that Usami would often make.

But the person before my eyes was not Usami. It was Youko Tsukimori, the well-behaved and talented beauty whom everyone admired.

Quite honestly, I was clueless. I was so mystified that I was starting to become terrified.

“Nonomiya-kun? Answer me ... why did you meet up with Misaki-sensei again after that incident?”

“I...” I was at a loss for words.

“Won’t you explain it to me...? Are you hiding things from me again?”

Her upright look was hard to endure.

There was only a single reason why I had gone to see Misaki Takaoka: to have her keep her side of the bargain that had been in limbo. However, I couldn’t possibly let Tsukimori know that.

“Nonomiya-kun, have you perhaps fallen in love with...”

All of a sudden, my blood started to boil. *Enough is enough*, I thought.

“...Even if that were true, why should I care about your opinion?”

I was sick and tired. Wasn’t Youko Tsukimori the source of everything? Because of her I had posed against my will, ended up in the center of a nerve-racking commotion, and went to meet Misaki Takaoka before the rumors had cooled off.

“—Did you just ask ‘why’?” she countered promptly. Her face then drew so near to mine that I could count every single one of her long eyelashes and clearly recognized the glitter of her round black eyes. “If you think you will not regret it, then I shall gladly explain it to you in *every* detail and make sure

that you will never ever again ask me that question.”

I swallowed my saliva. I saw raw pressure before my eyes. If the usual Tsukimori was freezing ice, the Tsukimori now was burning dry ice.

“Did you know? I happen to be a really bothersome girl—”

As she said so, Tsukimori placed her free hand on the knot of my necktie and pulled vigorously at the tie.

Having my throat corded, I crouched down and let out a groan.

“—I might no longer be able to hold myself back if I told you that reason. However, if you are willing to sacrifice your future, then I will gladly explain myself.”

Youko Tsukimori formed a crescent-shaped smile as she looked down at me coughing. As I tried to calm down my wild breath, I gazed absent-mindedly at the licentious girl before me. My heart was thumping away in my chest.

Youko Tsukimori was not normal. But for some reason she didn’t seem crazy to me, either.

Perhaps because I was – crazy in a way myself.

“...I am sorry, Nonomiya-kun. Something is wrong with me. Please forget what happened tonight,” she suddenly said, breaking the silence and ducking her head in shame.

She then brushed up her black hair with an elegant motion, and when I looked at her again, standing there was the composed Youko Tsukimori I had come to know.

“See you tomorrow,” she said in the usual, calm manner, and left as if nothing had happened. I was still thunderstruck as I gazed at her slender silhouette that was slowly distancing itself from me.

It was then that I suddenly started to wonder how well I actually knew the person that was Youko Tsukimori.

I had been under the impression that I knew her quite well, but perhaps I had only gotten to see a fraction of her true nature.

While I gazed at the silver crescent moon hanging high up in the sky, I reflected upon this with a somewhat absent mind.

Part 5

There was no conversation between Tsukimori and me when I went to school the following day. We did greet each other, but I avoided any further contact with her. It was most likely the same for her; we didn't exactly *ignore* each other nor were we angry.

I can't speak for Tsukimori, but I, on my part, was unsure about how to approach her because of the impact the incident last night had on me.

While I had been operating for Youko Tsukimori's sake, she had never asked me for it. I had been doing it of my own accord.

A few days passed during which we put a distance between each other. I was strangely timid and even Tsukimori acted somewhat awkward.

When we went to work, we did so separately. Because of that, I only learned of her absence that day after I had arrived at Victoria.

"Hm? Youko didn't tell you anything even though you're in the same freaking class? Anyways, she's gonna take a few days off because of some personal business!"

What kind of business might that be? I started to ponder. In the meantime, Mirai-san flashed a teasing smile and continued:

"Speaking of which – I heard you had some fun making out with some sexy school staff, eh?"

"...Who told you?"

"Riko."

Dammit, that girl[\[1\]](#). *Poking her nose into everything again.*

“Well, pal, it sounds like Youko’s done with you,” Mirai-san said.

“Done? We’re just classmates and workmates. Nothing more.”

“Listen, you’re bound to be at fault here, so go beg her forgiveness and bring her back to Victoria ASAP, okay?”

With these words Mirai-san gave me a mighty clap on the back. An *ugh* slipped out of my mouth from deep within. Unable to bear up with the pain, I squatted down.

“It’s no fun if Youko ain’t here! Hurry up and make peace with her!” she said with an oppressive voice from above.

How is this fair? When I let my gaze wander about with half-open eyes, I spotted Mr. Kujirai and Saruwatari-san hiding in a corner of the kitchen. When our eyes met, they immediately looked away.

Much to everyone’s chagrin, there was no one who could offer resistance to Mirai Samejima’s tyranny, save for Tsukimori who wasn’t here.

A day later, at the classroom. I was waiting for a chance to talk to Tsukimori.

To prevent misunderstandings: not because of Mirai-san and thus not to apologize to her. I was simply curious. Curious about what was important enough to skip work.

While watching her, I made a little observation. A subtle change in her attitude, which I would have not noticed normally, caught my attention.

Tsukimori was oddly restless.

For instance, she kept making sure of the time during our classes, and she failed even twice at her usual pencil flipping. Her demeanor was riddled with subtle irregularities.

As the school bell announced the lunch break, Tsukimori stood up and

silently left the classroom. This was smelling to high heaven. Without a second of hesitation, I decided to pursue her.

Her destination turned out to be the staff room. For a second, I thought she had been summoned by a teacher, but it was very unlikely that someone as well-behaving as Tsukimori would get the kind of summoning that would leave her unsettled.

After I had kept an eye on the door to the staff room for a while from afar, Tsukimori came out in the company of a female teacher. That moment, I felt as if my heart began to flutter.

“...Why is Tsukimori together with *that woman*?!” I asked myself and clicked my tongue in annoyance. On the other side of my gaze stood Misaki Takaoka with a bewitching smile.

The two of them started to move. I followed them while keeping a secure distance to stay unnoticed.

They walked for a while and eventually stopped at the entrance designated for visitors. Misaki Takaoka asked Tsukimori to take a seat, upon which they both sat down in a leather sofa. There was nobody nearby except for the two of them.

“...This is a great spot at this time of the day if you want to be alone,” I heard the teacher say as I hid behind a pillar, eavesdropping on them. My heart was pounding as though I had just finished a race. “By the way, I take it you’ve finally made up your mind, now that you’ve come to visit me?”

“...Yes. If you hold your promise and tell me everything you know, Misaki-sensei.”

Misaki Takaoka wore a broad, content smile on her face. Youko Tsukimori, on the other hand, presented herself oddly docile. *Is she tense...?*

“Also,” Tsukimori continued, “do keep all of this a secret from Nonomiya-kun.”

“Oh...? Really? Well, if that’s what you want.”

My head started to spin and fume in an attempt to make sense of their ambiguous conversation.

“Okay, Tsukimori-san, see you after school then,”

“Yes ... um, we meet at ... the preparation room, right?”

They closed their conversation like that and parted.

Even after they were gone, I found myself unable to move from the spot for a while. No matter how I pieced together the bits I had overheard, I always arrived at the worst conclusion.

Namely, the conclusion that Misaki Takaoka had approached Youko Tsukimori on the matter of her parents’ death.

I immediately turned mad at Misaki Takaoka for confronting Tsukimori with that matter, but then I realized that she had never promised not to. I had no one to direct my anger at.

I recalled the conversation between Misaki Takaoka and me that had taken place a few days earlier. She had fulfilled her part of the deal, although a bit late because of the commotion.

As soon as the commotion had finally started to abate, I had sneaked into the art preparation room.

If anyone saw me like this, the rumors of Misaki Takaoka and my affair were sure to catch fire again, but I wanted to learn what she knew about Tsukimori’s parents as soon as possible.

After I prompted her to fulfill her promise, Misaki Takaoka showed two sketches to me. They were by Tsukimori and they were the ones I had already seen. One of them depicted Usami and the other one depicted me.

“Haven’t you already shown these to me?” My wary question was answered with a smirk on her part. At first, I felt a bit offended, but when the woman

explained it to me, I lost my tongue.

“To tell the truth, these two sketches were drawn before and after Tsukimori’s ‘plight.’ Can you tell which is which, Nonomiya-kun?”

I reluctantly asked in response, “Can you...?”

Misaki Takaoka shrugged and shook her head. For a reason I did not know, that made my skin crawl.

“Of course, it’s easy to see from the date on the back, but I can’t make out the difference by looking at her art. That’s downright impossible. For a normal girl her age, something as trivial as lovesickness is enough to make a drawing ooze with all kinds of emotions! Now if you substitute that with the loss of one’s parents, there should absolutely be some kind of change, don’t you agree?”

She let out a faint laugh.

“...What on earth happened to Tsukimori-san? How could she keep a perfectly even temper despite losing her parents in quick succession...? Nonomiya-kun, do you know anything?”

I swallowed my saliva, confronted with her predatory smile.

“...I’m afraid not. I have no clue.” I was bewildered, of course, but at the same time I was also relieved. “All I know is that Youko Tsukimori is not your common girl,” I replied and pretended to be at my wit’s end.

“Haha,” she giggled. “Yeah, she’s everything but common. You don’t often see someone who’s that pretty and perfect at the same time,” she laughed contentedly.

Just like a certain frivolous police detective had been alarmed by his sixth sense that Youko Tsukimori was too perfect, Misaki Takaoka had noticed her unnaturalness through art.

However, that was not enough to solve the mystery surrounding Youko

Tsukimori. At the very least, it was not worth as much as the Murder Recipe I had found.

Moreover, she was ultimately just an art instructor, so there was no reason for me to harbor any fears.

My bad hunch had been dispelled.

...And yet, Misaki Takaoka's alarming words and Youko Tsukimori's strange behavior were preying on my mind.

As the woman had said herself, Tsukimori had appeared perfectly composed even when she lost her parents. A lot was required for her to ever expose her feelings so overtly.

It was still understandable if she opened herself to me, but it was absolutely ludicrous for her to do so in front of everyone.

Suddenly, I recalled what Misaki Takaoka said at the end of our conversation.

"It makes sense that everyone feels attracted to her. After all, she caught my interest as well. But I bet it's useless to approach her up-front. I mean, she's a prodigy in concealing her true thoughts. Mind telling me how you broke through to her, Nonomiya-kun?"

At the time, I hadn't taken her seriously and brushed her off, but thinking back at it now, she must have come up with a special, non-straightforward way of taking on Youko Tsukimori.

Anyway, I have no other choice but to wait until school's over and see for myself, I told myself to calm down.

Part 6

After school was over, I pursued Tsukimori. She was headed to the art preparation room as I had overheard earlier that day.

Shortly after she entered the room, the door was locked with a click, which

struck me as an ominous sound. After making sure that I was alone, I walked up to the door, pressed my ear against it and held my breath.

“...Great to have you, Tsukimori-san. Let’s start right away, but let me warn you: I will not hold back.”

“...Misaki-sensei, please wait.”

“...What’s wrong? Don’t tell me you changed your mind?”

“...No, just give me a second to prepare myself mentally.”

Because of the door separating us, I had trouble picking up on their conversation even though they were a lot closer than at noon.

“...Hmm, Tsukimori-san. I’m sorry to say this, but you’re past the point of no return. See, even I have a few things that I’m not willing to give up.”

“...I understand. It is the same for me.”

The sound disappeared. I was dying to know where they stood and what their expressions looked like. Not only from their exchange of words but also from the tone of her voice, it was apparent that Tsukimori was tense.

The silence continued for a while. Because I was so focused on not missing anything, I could clearly perceive the sounds from the school yard, the footsteps and voices of the students who were on their way home. Even worse, my heart was thumping so hard that the heartbeat struck me as noisy and I started to get the illusion of hearing the blood flowing through my veins and the sweat sliding down my skin.

It was then that thanks to my sharpened senses, I could detect someone coming my way ahead of time. I sped away from the door, hurried to the next window and pretended to be fiddling with my cell phone.

After a few moments, the janitor of our school crossed the corridor behind me.

I let out a sigh of relief and resumed perking up my ears.

“...Are you afraid?”

“...Huh?”

“...Aw, you’re not self-aware, are you? Tsukimori-san ... you’re trembling, you know?”

I tensed up. What on earth was going on inside?

“...Heh, I didn’t expect a Miss Perfect like you to have such a cute side,” the woman laughed dryly. “...I would love to show this little girl here to Nonomiya-kun.”

The peculiar sound of stilettos on linoleum leaked out from the room.

“...Hm ... you’re too self-controlled.”

“...I am afraid to say that I have never done this before, so I can’t...”

“...It might be easier if you showed all of yourself?”

“...Huh? ...Misaki-sensei...?”

“...It’s okay. Leave everything to me. I will free you.”

“...No ... Misaki-sensei ... please, don’t come any clo—KYA!”

Tsukimori screamed. In that very moment, I started up with incredible speed and grabbed the doorknob to step in, just to remember that the door was locked when I was about to pull.

There were two ways leading into the art preparation room – if I couldn’t enter here, I had to use the other door.

I immediately rushed to the entrance of the art room, which was situated a few meters from where I was standing. I grabbed the handle and pulled. “... This must be a bad joke.” Alas, the door to the art room was locked.

For a moment I considered just breaking through the door, but sadly, the odds were against me, considering my physique. Besides, my greatest fear was that making fuss could worsen Tsukimori’s situation.

What should I do? Fetch a spare key at the staff room? No, not realistic. I don't have a reason to get them, and it would take too long.

Staying put was not going to help, either. I got moving and ran outside to take a look at the windows. Perhaps I was so lucky as to find one of them to be open.

I arrived outside, catching for breath, and was confronted with the harshness of reality. *Curse this stupid world!*

With a single glance I realized that all windows were locked and was stricken by despair and helplessness. I hoped to at least catch a glimpse of what was going on inside, but the view was obstructed by a thick curtain.

Anxiety of the hidden. Fear of the unknown. Only negative images crossed my mind.

For example – the image starts with a beautiful woman teacher caressing a beautiful girl student in the evening light, after which she proceeds to use her extensive knowledge to expose the innocent girl's naked body and eventually lead her up the stairway of adulthood – I lost my composure just picturing it.

“...Wait?”

Is it really just a coincidence? Isn't Misaki Takaoka the one who locked all windows? Isn't all of this a vicious trap she has set up?

Perhaps, Tsukimori has been her target from the very beginning and I was just a tool for her scheme? She must be using me to threaten and constrain Tsukimori in some way. I can't think of another possibility that would explain why Youko Tsukimori – a girl I consider to be perfect in every imaginable way – would behave so uneasy and speak in such a tense manner.

What do I do what do I do what do I do what do I do what do I do what do I do what do I do what do I do what do I do?

The decision I made the next instant was bold and untypical for me.

I swiftly took off my shirt, formed a bag and tossed a few stones into it that were rolling around by my feet. I then tied the ends together and slammed the package of stones against one of the windows to the art room.

The glass shattered with a deafening *clang*. I thrust my arm through the hole, opened the window and jumped inside. Without missing a beat, I slammed open the door to the preparation room.

“Tsukimori!”

The two girls spun around to me and gave me bewildered looks.

“.....Huh?”

There are phrases like “Is this reality?” or “I feel like I’m dreaming” that are used by people who are taken by utter surprise, and indeed, I felt just like that. I even considered pinching myself.

Beautiful and white. Before me I saw an other-worldly piece of art that was devoid of filth and driven to perfection.

To put the situation in simple terms—

———Youko Tsukimori was naked.

More precisely, ahead of me was Youko Tsukimori, and she was posing a mermaid that was washed ashore on a pedestal that was covered with a long fur, and her body was cloaked in a white cloth, but because the cloth was translucent, she was effectively naked.



Very well, I thought that I was at the peak of my surprise, but the reaction she showed then made my heart-strings thrill even more than her nude.

Youko Tsukimori blushed red like a tomato the moment she noticed my glance.

She squatted down and turned away, showing her milky white back to me.

The best measure I could take in this situation was to leave as quickly as possible, but I wasn't able to move from the spot.

I found myself unable to focus on anything but *Youko Tsukimori*.

At last, the squatting girl let out a thin voice.

“...Nonomiya-kun...”

“...Hm...?”

“...Please leave...”

“...Ah, I'm ... I'm sorry.”

A half-naked boy was apologizing to a fully naked girl. It was a truly a queer sight to behold.

A moment later, dry laughter reverberated through the preparation room.

Before I stepped out of the room, I turned my head and saw *Misaki Takaoka* laughing loudly with tears in her eyes and pounding her fists on the table.

“Great job, Nonomiya-kun!”

I could understand why she would laugh. I would have laughed as well – if I hadn't been involved.

There is a phrase like “I wish the ground would open and swallow me up” that is used by people in horribly embarrassing situations, and indeed, I felt just like that. I wanted the ground to swallow me up and keep me there for the rest of my life.

I was riding my bicycle through town and bathing in the light of the setting

sun. The pedals felt heavier than usual.

Behind me sat a Youko Tsukimori who was as quiet as a mouse. I could understand. No one could behave normal after such a shock.

I'm not one to talk, though.

I may have sworn to never let her on my bicycle again, but today I was wholly thankful to have her sit on the carrier – this way, I didn't have to look her in the face.

As it turned out, all my fears had been groundless and it had been just me reading too much into everything.

Misaki Takaoka had been interested in Tsukimori for a longer time – to have her pose for her. Nude. As someone who was not willing to make any compromises when it came to art, she could not possibly let a potential, charming model like Tsukimori slip and had tried to make a deal with her several times in order to make the resulting drawing the highlight of her exhibition.

It was still a riddle to me what kind of deal they had eventually agreed on – they both refused to tell me – but in the end, Tsukimori agreed to pose nude.

To explain her antsy behavior that day, Tsukimori said, “Believe it or not, but I am actually a frail and faint-hearted girl.” Whether or not she was “frail and faint-hearted” was a subject for debate, but apparently she had been nervous about posing in the nude.

“I was just getting into it and then you come butting in and spoil the show. Doesn't look like Tsukimori-san is in a condition to continue, so I guess we have to call it a day.”

I was in no position to defend myself, so I ended up keeping quiet and being scolded by Misaki Takaoka. It was also she who commanded me to bring Tsukimori home on my bicycle.

By breaking that window I had apparently struck a responsive chord in a woman's heart. "I have to give you credit for that, though, Nonomiya-kun! *That's* what I expect the stronger sex to be like!" She turned a blind eye on it. About 10 minutes had passed since we started riding the bicycle.

"...Nonomiya-kun? You have a weak spot for women like Misaki-sensei ... don't you?" the girl behind me asked out of the blue.

"...In a way, I suppose I do."

I did not usually answer personal questions readily like that, but it was not the kind of situation to say "no."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Enjoy what...?"

"Did you enjoy touching the breasts of the woman you love so much? Misaki-sensei told me. You touched hers, right?"

Damn. That stupid woman opened her big mouth.

"...No, as I explained you several times, it was an accident. An unavoidable mishap."

"Mmm...?" she muttered and stayed silent for a few moments. After a while, she suddenly whispered, "...Did you like it?"

"...Like what?"

I think I knew what she was talking about, but I dearly hoped I was wrong.

"My body."

While I figured that a cheap excuse like *Didn't look closely. Don't know*, was not going to cut it, I had no clue what else to say. If anything, I was probably supposed to praise her, but I was way too embarrassed to do that.

"So, did you like it?" she repeated to break my silence. This time around, her question sounded a bit teasing.

“...No comment.”

“That will not do. I don’t want to come away empty-handed even though I exposed my body,” she said and leaned forward. “Do you understand the graveness of this matter, Nonomiya-kun? It was the first time in my life that a male saw me naked, you know? You were my first time.”

I couldn’t help coughing.

“...Would you stop phrasing it like that? Anyway, this was also just an accident. The same thing as if a dog had bitten you. We would both be best off if we simply forgot about it.”

“A dog, yes? You are one talkative dog, aren’t you? Shall I become your mistress and tame you to an obedient pet dog?”

“...The dog that is kept by you must be truly happy. Well, I am human, so it doesn’t matter to me.”

“Well, we’ll get back to that another time.”

A most alarming whisper reached my ears. I sincerely hoped I had misheard her.

“Anyway,” she continued. “I can’t let you go without telling me your impression. So, did you like my body?”

“...I’ll come up with an answer until tomorrow.”

“No,” she said and clang to me from behind. My heart missed a beat as I felt Youko Tsukimori’s soft body pressed against mine.

She did that before, but I don’t remember her to be that soft...

“...To tell you the truth, Nonomiya-kun, I am – braless right now.”

Because of the shocking fact she whispered into my ear, I accidentally lost control of the bicycle and swayed left and right for a few meters.

“I may lose to Misaki-sensei, but mine are pretty good, too, aren’t they?”

I fully agreed with her, but my pride stopped me from saying it.

“...I get it, so get off me already.”

“As soon as you tell me your thoughts on my body,” she said and clung to me even tighter. Because I now knew the reason, her awfully soft touch was turning from a stimulus to deadly poison for me, a healthy high schooler.

I wavered between pushing her down from the carrier and just answering her question. Eventually...

“...Yeah, well, you’re pretty ... I guess?”

I made the bitter decision of sacrificing my own pride in order to maintain an ethically respectable position.

“Hm...? What did you just say, Nonomiya-kun? This shopping district is so noisy, I’m afraid I did not understand you. Would you be so kind as to repeat yourself for me?”

Obviously, I had better pushed her down my bicycle even if it meant to ignore the principles of humanity. She was flat out lying – she sounded happy, after all.

I let out a theatrical sigh and repeated myself.

“...I said, um, that you’re pretty for crying out loud!”

My yell echoed through the twilit shopping district. I stopped caring.

Thanks to that, the students and salarymen who were on their way home, and the housewives who were doing the shopping, all turned around to me at once.

I quickly started to pedal with all my might to get out of this district as fast as possible.

Once we reached a relatively silent place, I finally slowed down again and tried to calm down my breathing.

“...Hey, that’s not what we agreed on.”

She was still tightly clinging to me.

I waited for a few moments, but there was no reply. Just when I was about to open my mouth to complain some more, I looked at her reflection in a show window and fell quiet.

In the show window – was a girl smiling blissfully. I had never seen Youko Tsukimori like this before.

While I was not smart enough to tell if she was smiling from heart or just acting like always, I felt rewarded either way and didn’t really care. After all, I had gotten to see a new side of hers. However, the sentence that then escaped her lips left me completely dumbfounded.

Well, perhaps the appropriate reaction would have been laughing, because if it was a joke, it was an excellent one.

“I am overjoyed to get your praise, Nonomiya-kun. Am I not a—”

She pressed her body tightly against mine and whispered into my ear.

“—simple girl?”

Translation Notes and References

1. Riko Saiketei is the protagonist of *Hennai Psychedelic*, which is a series by the author that plays in the same world.